

# KSL 5 News investigates Utah's new legal high

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**Lori Prichard reporting**

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SALT LAKE CITY -- A new kind of high is on Utah streets. It is sold under many brand names: Black Mamba, Pep Spice, Bliss, Dragon and Bombay Blue. All are basically the same thing: synthetic marijuana. Investigative reporter Lori Prichard went undercover to expose "spice." Sellers told KSL the herb gives users a "great high," a high comparable to that of marijuana. And spice is perfectly legal.

## Spice

The labels read "incense" and "not for human consumption," but don't let the packaging fool you. The truth was told to KSL's hidden camera inside several Salt Lake City smoke shops.

When asked, one seller described spice as "fake weed."

"Basically, it's the closest thing to being the real thing without being the real thing," said another.

Spice is a legal herb that can be found in smoke shops and convenience stores for anywhere between \$13 and \$26 a gram. Drug researcher and head of the Utah Addiction Center, Dr. Glen Hanson, says the herbs that make up spice are relatively mild. It's what's added to those herbs that makes it so potent.



"Synthetic THC," according to one seller.

THC, or tetrahydrocannabinol, is the main psychoactive ingredient in the cannabis plant. THC is the substance that gives marijuana its potency. Because THC is illegal, spice manufacturers lace their herbs with THC analogs. These man-made chemicals mimic the effects of THC.

"Some of these products indeed have been spiked with these THC analogs," said Hanson. "That's why people are experiencing the marijuana feel."

So if smoking spice produces a legal high, why don't the manufacturers just come out and say that?

"If you start promoting them for use in humans, there is some degree of quality control that's expected," said Hanson. "So that's sort of their way to avoid that. So we'll just say that it's not for human consumption - wink, nod."

## Spice and the law

One of the reasons people turn to spice? It provides a way to get high without breaking the law. That is something one West Valley City mom saw first-hand during her 17-year-old son's battle with drug addiction.

"The kids think they are so smart, they're beating the system," said Kerry.

Kerry asked us not to use her last name or identify her son, but she did say she and her husband have worked hard to get him clean. They had him arrested and sent him to counseling. He was okay for awhile, but then he seemed to take a turn for the worse.



Lori Prichard with Kerry

"He had the munchies. He had the red eye. All the stuff like marijuana," she said.

Turns out, Kerry's son wasn't using pot again. He was smoking spice.

"I thought he was just using incense," she said. "I thought he was burning incense in his room. I had no clue." Now that she knows about spice, Kerry is very concerned. She told KSL, "I don't want to sit and watch my son self-destruct."

According to an undercover narcotics detective with the Unified Police Department, "If kids want to get high, they will find a way to get high." The detective first started seeing spice within the past year. While he is aware of both adults and kids using spice, the detective said he sees it most often with high school kids on probation who want to get around the law.



"They're using that to get around their treatments and their obligations." The detective explained the kids' mentality as "get the high that they can without getting in trouble. Why not do it?"

When Kerry started suspecting her son was using some substance, she threatened him with drug tests. But each time, he was more than willing to comply.

"I'd say, 'Oh, let's go get drug tested,'" said Kerry. "He'd say, 'Fine. I'll pass.' He kept calling me on it and I'd say 'Okay. Let's do it.' 'Fine - I'll pass.'"

Kerry's son did pass. How? Spice does not show up on drug tests because it is a legal substance. That point was made at several of the smoke shops KSL visited with a hidden camera.

"It doesn't show up on a drug test, no. And it's not illegal either," said one seller. "I mean, even if there was a drug test, it's not illegal."

The inability to test for spice has left parents like Kerry feeling helpless.

"It's really, really frustrating. We don't know what to do. We really don't," she said.

## Designer drug

While spice is currently legal in the United States, it has caught the attention of many law enforcement agencies and world governments.

Several European countries have stepped in to stop its use, even though that is where some of the most popular spice brands originate. In March 2009, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) issued a bulletin warning about spice and its chemical makeup. The U.S. military has banned the use of spice on certain bases. And now, KSL has started to hear the federal government may designate spice a "designer drug." Simply put, merely tinkering with a molecule like THC isn't enough to get it back on the market as something else. If it acts like marijuana, it's illegal.

As for Utah, KSL has yet to hear about any move to prohibit the use of spice. However, the undercover narcotics detective who KSL interviewed said, "Yeah, it probably should be banned."

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